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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a survey conducted in 1982 by the Rosemount, Minnesota, school district as a model for other districts wishing to obtain reliable information about their communities at low cost. The paper outlines the following information: (1) the objectives of the survey; (2) the district's constraints and resources; (3) preliminary questions used to plan the survey; and (4) steps the district followed in planning, conducting, and analyzing the survey. (MCG)

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How to Conduct a Low-Cost, High Quality Community Survey (C-40)

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Independent School District 196, Rosemount, Minnesota

National School Boards Association Annual Convention,
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More than ever before, the public is questioning the role and activities of public schools and demanding accountability. Simultaneously, individual and community needs are changing at an increasing rate as the move from an industrial to an information society continues. As educators, we should be accountable to the public and must be at the forefront of meeting these needs and facilitating these changes. We must be aware of the attitudes of our citizens and involve them in the exciting, challenging task of being leaders, not just followers, in our changing society.

Data is an essential component of the information society. Survey research is a primary data-gathering technique, as well as an effective tool for building community awareness, support and trust.

During the first eight months of 1982, Independent School District 196, Rosemount, Minnesota, planned, prepared, conducted, analyzed and reported on a telephone survey of a random sample of the district's population. We had an 87 percent response rate. With the exception of data processing, the survey was handled from start to finish by district staff members and volunteers, and an advisory committee of citizens, staff and students. The only costs incurred, approximately $1,000, were for photocopying the questionnaires and data processing.

Independent School District 196 is a growing public school system in the south suburbs of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The district covers an area of 110 square miles and includes all or part of nine municipalities. In 1981-82, when the survey was conducted, there were 12,800 students attending kindergarten through grade 12 classes in the 15 district schools, and 47,000 people living within the district boundaries. At that time the district employed approximately 1,500 people and had a total budget of $35.5 million.

This was the first time a district-wide community survey had been conducted in the district. The experiences we had and the knowledge and skills we gained may be valuable to anyone attempting such a task.

Close attention to process and detail is essential in planning, developing and carrying out a survey. While actually conducting our survey took only four days, preparation for the activities in those four days took six months.

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OBJECTIVES: Begin by setting objectives or goals for the survey. In our district, the goals were to:

- Identify attitudes and beliefs about education in District 196, including where citizens obtain their information and how the attitudes and beliefs are formed.
- Identify demography of district residents.
- Gather data to help prepare the next five-year long range plan.
- Gather data to help the board of education and administration prepare short-term and long-term curriculum, facilities, staffing and financial plans.

GUIDELINES: Take a realistic look at the expectations of and available resources in your organization.

In District 196, we were aware of the following:

Guidelines: No outside consultants.

Scientifically valid results.

Data needed by summer 1982.

Low-cost.

Survey process and questionnaire must be reviewed and approved by the superintendent and board of education.

Resources: Two staff members with backgrounds, experience and/or training in survey research; and with writing, census/data processing and interpersonal relationship skills.

Support services of the administrative offices--office supplies, printing, photocopying, access to telephones.

Support of the board of education and administration.

Assistance of a citizen-staff-student task force.

SETTING THE FRAMEWORK:

Once you set the objectives, and before you take any action, begin the survey process by posing and answering the following questions:

1. <u>What do we want to know about our community</u>?

(We wanted to be aware of community attitudes towards the schools, towards staff members, towards the quality and quantity of education offered to students and towards other programs and support services offered by the school district. We also wanted information about the demographic make-up of the community.)

2. Is a survey the best way to obtain this data?

(We did not want to commit a large amount of time and resources to developing and conducting a survey if the information we needed was obtainable through other channels. We could, for example, learn about citizens' attitudes towards the schools through public meetings, community groups, parent and citizen participation in school activities, etc. But the input gained from people who participate in these activities would not reflect the community as a whole, it would just reflect the attitudes of those people most involved in the schools. Since we sought information about the attitudes of the total community, it was determined that a survey of a random sample of the population would be the only way to meet our needs.)

3. Who do we want to survey?

(We wanted the opinions of adults who lived in the school district. They are the people who pay taxes to support the schools, who may have children who attend the schools, who are able to vote in school elections and who often have strong feelings about what should and shouldn't be taught.)

4. What type of survey should we use--mail, telephone or personal interview?

(We wanted responses from a random sample of adult district residents and we wanted as high a response rate as possible. At the same time, we were limited by a seven-month timeline, by a lack of financial resources and by a shortage of staff members and volunteers experienced in survey research. Within those constraints, we determined that a telephone survey would give the highest rate of response with a relatively low expenditure of time and money. A mail survey would have been more costly, because of postage expenses, and would have had a lower response rate. A personal interview survey would have required a great deal more staff and volunteer time, as well as a team of highly trained people to conduct the interviews.)

5. Who will do the interviewing?

(Interviews were conducted by volunteers trained by the two staff members. The volunteers were recommended by school principals in the district and were contacted with details of the project and their role.)

6. How will the results be compiled?

(The results were compiled in two steps. First, we reviewed all completed questionnaires immediately after the interview to check for legibility and proper marking of answer categories. If we had any questions, the interviewer was immediately contacted for clarification. Then the data was processed by a computer consortium that provides data processing services to our district. A representative from the data processing organization was consulted while the questionnaire was being designed to ensure ease and accuracy of data processing.)

7. How will the results be used?

(Before the questionnaire was written, it was determined that the results would be used for short-range and long-range financial, curriculum and personnel planning in the school district. Knowing how the results would be used helped provide guidelines for questionnaire content. The results would be publicized to students, staff members and the public and would then be used as the basis for needed changes, maintenance of programs and further research.)

8. Who will write the questionnaire?

(It was decided that the questionnaire would be written in-house by those persons most qualified to write it, with input from other individuals and groups. The two staff members chosen to develop the questionnaire and oversee the entire survey process had training and background in survey research.)

9. When will the results be needed?

(The board of education requested that the survey be completed and data be compiled by the end of the 1981-82 school year. We used June 1982 as our goal.)

PROCESS:

The answers to these and other questions provide a framework for the survey process. In District 196 the following process was followed as we developed the questionnaire and prepared to conduct the survey:

1. We met approximately once a month with a task force of citizens, staff members and students who volunteered to share their ideas and react to our proposals regarding surveying the community. It was made clear from the beginning that the task force would serve in an advisory capacity, not a decision-making capacity.

2. The staff members responsible for the survey did extensive research on survey research to become as 'expert' as possible. They particularly focused on telephone surveys, interviewer training and questionnaire design. This research continued throughout the duration of the survey process.

3. We sought input and held meetings with people and groups involved with the district who sought information from the community. Board of education members, the superintendent, administrators, other citizen-staff-student task forces, teachers, support staff--all had ideas about information they would like to have from the community. Their needs and wants were considered as we designed the questionnaire and, whenever possible, questions were included to give them the information they sought. Since the survey was commissioned by the board of education and superintendent, a great deal of attention was given to their needs.

4. The questionnaire went through many revisions. We began by including all the questions we would like to ask and then removing duplicates, unclear questions, questions that would give us answers that would be interesting but not really useful, etc. We tried out the questionnaire on colleagues and friends who lived outside the school district and on each other to determine if it could be read easily, if the questions were understood and if the answer categories were appropriate. Refinements continued almost until the last minute. The final questionnaire was approved after the pre-test and just days before the final survey was to be conducted.

5. Volunteer interviewers were recruited with the help of our 15 building principals. Each principal was asked to select three people in his or her attendance area who had been involved with school activities and who had, so far as could be determined, a good 'telephone voice'. We contacted those 45 people, explained the project to them and discussed what their role would be if they volunteered to be telephone interviewers--and if they were interested in the project and had the time available when needed.

6. Two training sessions were held for volunteers, including the pre-test. In the sessions we reviewed the questionnaire, strongly emphasized the rules of good telephone interviewing (i.e., reading the questions exactly as written, refraining from volunteering opinions or giving extra information, etc.), discussed how to be sure the interviewer had reached the appropriate respondent and gave the volunteers an opportunity to practice interviewing each other. We also emphasized the importance of confidentiality and did not allow the volunteers to take questionnaires home with them.

7. A scientific random sample was selected with the help of a random sample table. We determined that for our population of 47,000, a random sample of 384 would give us a valid sample of our community within a five percent confidence level. The sample was selected at random, by computer, from the district resident census file. (The file includes a list of every household in the district.) The sample selected was large enough so a sample of the sample could be used for the pre-test.

8. A pre-letter was sent to respondents to let them know that the survey was being conducted and why it was being conducted, informing them that they would be called and during what period of time, and assuring them of the confidentiality of the interview. We also let them know that the results would be publicized. In retrospect, it is clear that the pre-letter did smooth the way for our interviewers in many cases.

9. The pre-test (of a sample of the sample) was conducted on a Saturday morning with the trained volunteer interviewers. They were instructed to keep track of any problems or misunderstandings they had with the questions or questionnaire, as well as to note responses. Their feedback was used to make final revisions in the questionnaire.

10. The survey was conducted from 6:30-9:30 p.m., on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in early May. The interviewers worked from telephones available in the school district administrative offices. There were two or three supervisors present at all times to answer questions, help with problems, observe the interviewers and check completed questionnaires. Food and beverages were provided in a central location where the volunteers could come to talk, ask questions or just relax between interviews. All 384 phone numbers were called within the first two nights and the last two nights (and a bit of time during the days) were used for callbacks.

11. Each completed questionnaire was reviewed immediately after each interview to be sure there were answers to every question and every answer was legible. Comments, answers to open-ended questions and answers that fit in the 'other' category were coded for data processing.

12. The processed data was presented on the basis of 'How can we best use this information to improve the quality of education we provide?'

13. The data was presented to the board of education in a special report at a board meeting and a complete summary of the results was published and distributed to staff members and all district residents.

14. The data has been used to improve the instructional program, as a guide to provide parents and citizens with the information they want about the schools and as a basis for short-range and long-range planning by the board of education, administration and task forces.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Public education is faced with decreasing sources of money and a shift from federal and state support of schools to local support of schools. Our local communities, therefore, are demanding and have the right to demand that their schools be responsive to their needs. Before we can meet these needs and help our communities move into the future, we must know what the needs and attitudes are. Knowledge of our communities becomes more and more important. Survey research is a low-cost, practical way to gather a great deal of information about the community while also involving the community in the schools. A well-done community survey results in increased knowledge for the district, an increased sense of involvement in the schools by the community and a higher level of support and trust between the schools and community.